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## 2 Introduction by *T Neighbour*

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### 2.1 General

This report presents the results of an archaeological excavation carried out by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) from October to December 1995 of a kerbed cairn (NGR: NB 2180 3475; [Illus 1](#)). The cairn ([Illus 2](#)) was discovered during the removal of topsoil along the line of a road-straightening operation at Breascleite on the Island of Lewis. Fieldwork was conducted in three separate blocks: 13–20 October, 30 October to 15 November and 27 November to 8 December 1995.

Throughout this report the cairn at Olcote is referred to as a ‘kerbed cairn’. Other authorities (eg [Neighbour 1996b](#); [Campbell & Coles 1999](#); [Branigan & Foster 2000](#); numerous Curtis & Curtis entries in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*) have referred to similar sites in the Hebrides as ‘kerb cairns’ ([Close-Brooks 1995](#) is a notable exception to this general rule). However, the term ‘kerb cairn’ was coined in the early 1970s ([Ritchie & MacLaren 1972](#)) for a particular type of Bronze Age burial monument where very large boulders surround a small area within which a burial is placed (Ritchie memorably compares a kerb cairn to a ‘petrified charlotte rousse’, [Ritchie et al. 1975](#), 30) and the use of that term to describe the monument at Olcote would be incorrect. Similarly, the site at Olcote cannot be described as a ‘small cairn’ ([Ritchie & MacLaren 1972](#)) as the kerbs on such monuments tend to be rather more irregular than that at Olcote.

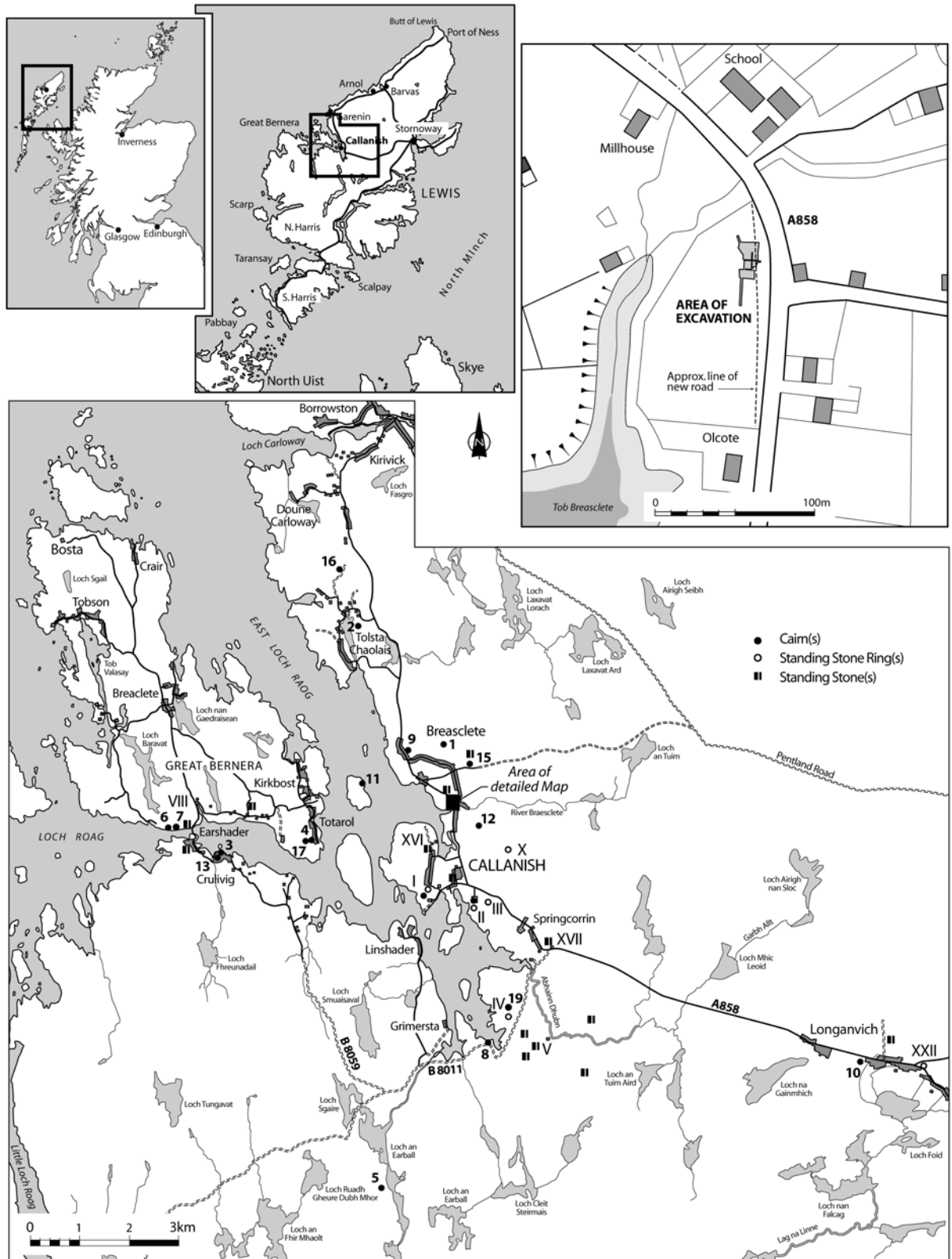
### 2.2 Circumstances of discovery

Following topsoil stripping of an area approximately 17 m × 10 m in advance of a road-straightening project at Breascleite in mid-September 1995, a scatter of quartz was discovered by Margaret Curtis of Olcote, Calanais. Preliminary analysis suggested that a substantial proportion of the collected assemblage appeared to have been worked: chunks, cores and small flakes were recovered. The artefacts were

collected from the surface of natural glacial till exposed within approximately 25% of the stripped area. The artefact scatter lay within a grassed and formerly cultivated field on a gentle north-facing slope where a soil depth of 0.2–0.4 m was present. The land dipped northwards to a former stream channel in which lay a deposit of peat over 1 m deep. To the south, on the summit of the rise and within the wayleave for the road, a scatter of stones was thought to indicate disturbed structural remains, although a purely natural origin was considered equally possible. Any remains associated with the artefact scatter within the road corridor were initially considered likely to have been heavily damaged and probably obliterated by the road construction.

The project was thus initially conceived as an important opportunity to conduct a controlled examination of a worked quartz assemblage recovered *in situ*. This artefact resource has often been under-researched in excavations in the Western Isles, with even relatively large quartz assemblages, such as those from the Loch Olabhat excavations ([Armit forthcoming](#)), being retrieved mostly by sieving. Accordingly, the initial objective of the project was to establish the extent, content, structural associations and date of the artefact scatter and assess the local geomorphological and environmental sequence, as this may have had a bearing upon the taphonomy of the artefacts. The location of the finds on a slope indicated that fieldwork would need to assess whether the artefacts were in their original discard context as opposed to being re-deposited there by hillwash.

As it became clear that the artefact scatter was associated with the previously unsuspected buried structure, the objectives of the project altered. The revised objectives were: to record and excavate the structural remains; to determine if possible their nature, function, date and extent; and to place the excavated remains within their immediate environmental, geomorphological and topographic context.



Illus 1 Location maps (based on the Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright). Key on page 4



*Illus 2 The cairn from the south-west (courtesy of Air Sea Rescue)*

*Illus 1 (opposite) Location maps (based on the Ordnance Survey – Crown copyright). **Key:** 1: Kerbed cairn (NB23 NW8) – **Curtis & Curtis 1991a**; 2: Probable kerbed cairn (NB13 NE12) – **Curtis & Curtis 1991b**; 3: Possible burial cairn (NB13 SE15) – **Curtis & Curtis 1991c**; 4: Possible burial cairn (NB13 SE16) – **Curtis & Curtis 1991d**; 5: Possible kerbed cairn (NB22 NW5) – **Curtis & Curtis 1991e**; 6: Possible kerbed cairn (NB13 SE20) – **Curtis & Curtis 1992a**; 7: Possible kerbed cairn (NB13 SE21) – **Curtis & Curtis 1992b**; 8: Possible kerbed cairn and possible burial cairn (NB22 NW6) – **Curtis & Curtis 1992c**; 9: Possible burial cairn (NB23 NW11) – **Curtis & Curtis 1992d**; 10: Possible burial cairn (NB32 NW4) – **Curtis & Curtis 1992e**; 11: Burial cairn (NB13 NE13) – **Curtis & Curtis 1994**; 12: Possible burial cairn (NB23 SW66) – **Curtis & Curtis 1997**; 13: Possible kerbed cairn (NB13 SE14) – **Curtis & Curtis 1990a**; 14: Chambered cairn (NB23 NW1) – **Henshall 1972, 460**; 15: Two kerbed cairns (NB23 NW3) – **Curtis & Curtis 1995**; 16: Possible burial cairn (NB13 NE8) – **Curtis & Curtis 1990b**; 17: Kerbed cairn (NB13 SE13) – **Curtis & Curtis 1990c**; 18: Kerbed cairn on Cnoc an Tursa – **Campbell & Coles 1999**; 19: Burial cairn (NB23 SW4) – **Ponting et al. 1976**. Roman numerals – Standing stones and circles: numbers follow those on the map of standing stones and circles at Callanish (University of Glasgow, Department of Geography 1978)*